

**“Not a good look”: impossible dilemmas for young women negotiating the culture of intoxication in the United Kingdom.**

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**Title:**

**“Not a good look”: Impossible dilemmas for young women negotiating the culture of intoxication in the UK.**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates young women’s alcohol consumption in the UK within a widespread culture of intoxication in relation to recent debates about post-feminism and contemporary femininity. Young women are faced with an ‘impossible dilemma’, arising from being called on to drink excessively and to adopt a hyper-sexual form of heterosexual femininity.

Drawing on a recent interview study with 24 young white working-class and middle-class women in the South-West of England, we explore how young women inhabit the dilemmas of contemporary femininity in youth drinking cultures, striving to achieve the ‘right’ form of hyper-sexual femininity and an ‘optimum’ level of drunkenness.

**(100 words)**

**Key words**

Femininity, Gender, Consumption, Culture, Alcohol, Post-feminism

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## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen substantial changes to young people's drinking cultures and the gendering of alcohol consumption in the UK. This pattern is also found across many parts of Western and Eastern Europe, North America, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, with local, national and regional variations (Ahlstrom and Osterberg, 2004/5; Beccaria and Sande, 2003; Casswell et al., 2003; Twigg and Moon, 2013; Young et al., 2005). There has been a marked increase in the proportion of young people in the UK drinking over the government recommended weekly limits (14 units of alcohol for women and 21 units for men), especially amongst young women (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009). There is recent evidence that after substantial increases since the mid-1990s, levels of alcohol consumption amongst young people in the UK are starting to plateau. Young people's drinking practices appear to have polarised, with a proportion of young people drinking less or abstaining, while amongst other groups, alcohol consumption levels have risen (Measham, 2008; Piacentini and Banister, 2009).

Young women's alcohol consumption is rapidly catching up with that of their male peers, but although young women in the UK are drinking more alcohol more frequently and consuming stronger drinks than they were two decades ago, they are still drinking less than young men (Measham and Ostergaard, 2009). In addition, the British night-time economy has been transformed since the mid-1990s (Measham and Brain, 2005). Recent changes to the drinks industry, alcohol advertising, marketing and the retail trade have all contributed to a shift towards more 'female-friendly' alcohol products and drinking spaces (Szmigin et al., 2008). Young women are now playing an active part in a new and widespread culture of 'extreme drinking' based on the regular normative practice of drinking to intoxication (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Griffin et al., 2009; 2013).

A closer look at the history of public drinking in the UK reflects the gendered nature of drinking as a consumption practice. Drinking has traditionally been associated with masculinity and the rituals and relationships of the workplace (Aubrey et al., 2002; Brain, 2000; Thurnell-Read, 2013). As Hey (1986) argues, this firmly established the public house (pub) as not only working class, but as a highly gendered masculine domain. Until the 1970s, licensed venues in towns and cities across the UK were dominated by traditional pubs, but by the 1990s licensed venues in most towns and cities had changed considerably (Aubrey et al., 2002). Brain (2000), Measham (2004) and Measham and Brain (2005) document the changes

since the impact of 'rave' culture on young people's alcohol consumption during the late 1980s, which led many young people away from alcohol-based pubs and night clubs.

The alcohol industry responded to this, and the strength of alcoholic drinks increased considerably as alcohol was redeveloped and recommodified as a 'psychoactive' product (Measham and Brain, 2005). In the mid-1990s a new range of higher strength 'designer drinks' were marketed to young people using tropes from dance culture that likened the effects of drinking to the consumption of recreational drugs, representing young people as 'psychoactive consumers' (Brain, 2000; Measham, 2004). The introduction of alcohol to 'dry' rave clubs in the early 1990s, together with new style bars aimed at young people, began to transform British towns and cities, with some regional variations (Measham, 2004). Rather than the relatively narrow traditional pub clientele of mainly white working-class heterosexual men, city-centre café bars, theme bars and theme pubs began to attract a more diverse clientele in the 18 to 30 age range, including more women, and more middle class consumers (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Measham, 2004). These various changes to the landscape of British night-life have been termed the 'feminisation of the night-time economy' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001).

These shifts contributed to the emergence of a pervasive new culture of intoxication amongst young drinkers, reflected in visible public displays of drunkenness by young men and young women. This occurred in the wider context of an ongoing and highly gendered moral panic about youthful drinking (Szmigin et al., 2008). Pervasive representations of young women across the UK media constitute young female drinkers as irresponsible, dissolute and a social problem. Skeggs (2005) argues that the female 'binge' drinker is marked as white, excessively heterosexual and working-class. Thus, the construction of young women drinkers within the culture of intoxication appears to be classed and racialised, mobilising derogatory representations of white working-class femininity.

Within the increasingly competitive structure of the free market economy in affluent societies, young women engage in visible public consumption and are called on to craft consumer identities in line with contemporary representations of youthful femininity (Gill, 2007; 2008; Harris, 2004 McRobbie, 2007; 2008). Marketing strategies aimed at women draw on postfeminist discourses of (hetero)sexual assertiveness, empowerment and autonomy. Gill (2007; 2008) and McRobbie (2004; 2008) have explored the ways in which young women are represented as gaining control through the commodification of their

appearance and their constitution as active and desiring sexual subjects. However, traditional patriarchal sexual double standards around heterosexual attractiveness and the importance of respectable femininity remain (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Skeggs, 1997; Wykes and Gunter, 2005). Renold and Ringrose have referred to this as the ‘schizoid’ discourse of femininity (Renold and Ringrose, 2008, 2011).

Young people’s drinking culture is a key arena in which young women negotiate the contradictions of femininity in a postfeminist context (Griffin et al., 2013). Recent research has referred to contemporary femininity in the context of youth drinking culture as:

“a profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit. The juxtaposition of hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication produces a particularly difficult set of dilemmas for young women.”  
(Griffin et al., 2013, p.184).

Mainstream drinking venues encourage versions of femininity in which young women are called on to be (hetero)sexy, ‘sassy’ and ‘up for it’ (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). In addition to the consumer-oriented image of groomed femininity, young women in such venues often display a hyper-sexual form of heterosexual femininity that involves wearing short tight-fitting outfits, high-heeled shoes, long hair (usually blonde) and lots of makeup (Griffin et al., 2013). This appearance presents a precarious combination of hedonistic, bold and heterosexually attractive hyper-femininity which unsettles traditional forms of respectable femininity (Skeggs, 1997). Young women are also called on to drink heavily within a pervasive culture of intoxication of ‘extreme drinking’, whilst simultaneously inhabiting this hyper-sexual form of femininity. Of course, not all young women do drink heavily and not all adopt this hyper-sexual form of femininity, but these are the normative expectations associated with ‘having a good time’ on a night out for many young women in the UK (Griffin et al., 2013; Piacentini and Banister, 2009).

Complex alcohol marketing strategies target young women through promotions that draw on postfeminist discourses of empowerment, autonomy and a contemporary ‘sassy’ femininity. Although the alcohol industry’s ‘marketing mix’ (McCreanor et al., 2005) exhorts young women to participate in the culture of intoxication, their participation is far from straightforward, locating young women drinkers in a myriad of contradictory discourses. The culture of intoxication has become part of young women’s social lives and they have become increasingly valuable to alcohol advertisers and the alcohol industry in general. Young

women are also a target for government concern over the levels of alcohol they consume (Measham and Ostergaard, 2009).

Such contradictory representations of young women drinkers are related to tensions between and within discourses of traditional and postfeminist forms of femininity. The latter constitute women as entitled to behave as they want to, and to 'be who they want to be' (Gentz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2007; Griffin, 2005). These contradictions are particularly problematic when women engage in pleasure-seeking behaviour within a traditionally masculine arena (McRobbie, 2007). For young women, 'being who you want to be' and behaving how you want to behave can incur moral judgment and disparagement, as gendered double standards remain at the heart of traditional discourses of femininity (Day et al., 2004; De Visser and McDonnell, 2011; Jackson, 2006; Jackson and Tinkler, 2007; McRobbie, 2007).

Male drinkers' opinions of women who drink are laden with ambiguity and disparagement (Clayton and Humberstone, 2006; Lyons, Dalton and Hoy, 2006; Mullen et al., 2007). Heavy drinking is seen as a marker of hegemonic masculinity and although there is a pervasive assumption that 'real men' should be able to hold their drink (Willott and Lyons, 2011), getting visibly drunk is an acceptable norm amongst many groups of young men (Clayton and Humberstone, 2006; De Visser and Smith, 2007; Gough and Edwards, 1998; Thurnell-Read, 2013). So although young women are called on to 'drink like a guy' within the culture of intoxication, this is fraught with dilemmas and difficulties in practice (Young et al., 2005). Whilst young people often recount stories that constitute drinking to the point of passing out as 'fun', young women find it difficult to manage the loss of respectable femininity associated with extreme drunkenness (Griffin et al., 2009).

Young women's engagement with the culture of intoxication in the UK is characterised by an uneasy and often contradictory combination of pleasure, having (chaotic) fun, and attempts to manage or avoid potential risks while drinking like 'one of the boys' but dressing in a hyper-sexualised manner. We turn now to our own research on how groups of young women from middle and working class backgrounds negotiate contemporary femininity within the culture of intoxication, and how they inhabit leisure spaces in the British night-time economy. This relatively small-scale in-depth interview study was conducted in the South-West of England during 2009 to 2010. A recent analysis of quantitative data from the Health Survey for England from 2001 to 2009 indicates that rates

of self-reported 'binge drinking' amongst young people has remained substantially higher in northern England compared to the south-west and other areas of southern England (Twigg and Moon, 2013).<sup>(1)</sup> So this region does not have the highest levels of (self-reported) alcohol consumption amongst young people in the UK.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Twenty four working-class and middle-class young women who drink alcohol participated in this study. The young women were all white and were aged between 19 and 24, living in a small city in the South-West of England. Recruitment was through a mixture of opportunity sampling and snowballing. Some young women were recruited by friends of the first author and others were approached in a public place to request their participation. Participants were requested to ask friends with whom they socialized to take part in the study. Potential participants were told the study was interested in their experiences of going out to bars and clubs, and offered a £10 clothing voucher for taking part. The young women were interviewed in six friendship groups and data were collected via semi-structured interviews.

Each friendship group comprised between two and five young women who socialized in mainstream bars and clubs in the city centre together. Three groups comprised middle-class young women, two of which comprised undergraduate students studying at a local university who went out on 'student nights' during the week <sup>(2)</sup> (Group 3 MC and Group 4 MC).<sup>(3)</sup> The other group comprised undergraduate students studying at universities across the UK and living in locations near these universities during term time but who otherwise lived with their families in the city or near to the city (Group 5 MC). Group 5 MC went out to mainstream venues in the city on weekend nights. Three groups comprised working-class young women who lived in the city. Within these three groups, one young woman was unemployed (from Group 1 WC) and the rest were in employment. These three groups also went out to mainstream venues in the city on weekend nights. The young women all socialized in what could be termed 'big nights out' as they tended to only go out to mainstream venues on especially busy nights.

Bourdieu's theories of capital, especially cultural capital (legitimate knowledge and cultural competence) and economic capital (economic resources) provided an overall guide when

allocating the young women to middle class or working class groups. Bourdieu (1986) argues that class is distinct and classifiable and that factors such as taste and accent are intangible markers of class. Thus, although economic background is taken into account, it is not simply straightforward to allocate young women to the middle class groups on the basis that they are undergraduate students as this does not acknowledge that working class people study for a degree. Likewise, it is not straightforward to allocate young women to the working class groups simply on the basis of unemployment or type of occupation because this does not take account of young women from middle class backgrounds who for a variety of reasons may be unemployed or working in lower level occupations.

## **Procedure**

The young women took part in focus groups involving semi-structured interviews within their friendship groups. Using friendship groups as the basis for focus group discussions enabled freer debate, drawing on participants' shared experiences in a relaxed atmosphere (Lyons and Willott, 2008). Two phases of friendship group discussions were conducted each lasting around one hour. Phase 1 comprised semi-structured questions designed to facilitate a general discussion about the young women's social drinking practices and going out to bars and clubs. For example, 'What is a typical night out like?' The schedule for Phase 2 was more loosely based. This comprised questions about media representations of young women drinkers and discussions facilitated from watching five selected TV advertisements for alcoholic drinks. An example question was 'What do you think about the ways that 'girls nights out' are portrayed in the media?' Phase 2 was designed to facilitate further discussions about the young women's social drinking as well as femininity and class. Most of the data presented in this paper emerged from Phase 1 of the study.

For one group (3 MC), both focus group discussions took place in a quiet private room on a university campus. The focus group discussions for the other five groups took place in the home of one member of each group. The focus group interview schedule was designed to allow the research topic to be addressed and to encourage participants' discussions with one other. The first author was the interviewer in all cases, avoiding leading participants and being attentive to the group interaction. Prompts and additional questions were introduced where appropriate in order to maintain the focus of the group discussion on the research topic, and to enable participants to expand on objects of interest (Barbour, 2007).



Discussions were audio recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim prior to a detailed analysis of the talk using a form of Foucauldian discourse analysis.<sup>(4)</sup>

### **Ethical issues**

Recruitment was conducted after ethical approval was granted by the Department of Psychology Ethical Board, The University of Bath. Ethical approval was in line with the ethical guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS). Each participant signed and dated an informed consent form. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that their discussions will be entirely anonymous. Each participant and all other individuals mentioned in the focus group discussions were given a pseudonym. Real names were deleted from the transcripts, apart the consent forms which were stored securely and away from the transcripts. Names of locations and venues have also been changed except venues that are part of large chains across the UK.

Participants were informed that they were free to remove their data, and able to withdraw from the study at any time if they wished. Participants were told that they did not have to talk about anything that could make them feel uncomfortable. This was particularly important for participants who were previously known to the researcher. All reasonable steps were taken to ensure that participants did not experience anxiety or stress beyond and above what they might reasonably expect to experience in their everyday lives. Each focus group interview was conducted in a safe secure place where participants felt comfortable and at ease. At the end of the focus group sessions, participants were debriefed by discussing together their experience of taking part and were given the opportunity to ask any questions. Participants were provided with a list of websites offering information and support related to young people's drinking.

### **Analytic procedure**

The data were analysed using a form of Foucauldian discourse analysis. This approach to qualitative analysis is concerned with the way in which language constitutes psychological and social life (Willig, 2008). Examining the text in this way involves attending to the specific and often contradictory manner in which objects related to the focus of the study are constituted (Malson, 1998; Willig, 2008). A contextualised analysis of these constructions was then refined by exploring their relationship to cultural discourses around femininity and drinking. This enables an exploration of how the culture of intoxication is constituted as a

cultural norm in the UK and the ways in which femininity and masculinity, and drinking relatively high quantities of alcohol are understood within this context.

The analysis was conducted in 4 stages, but this was not a simple linear process because discourse analysis is an iterative process that involves constantly returning to the data in order to develop the analysis. The first stage involved reading and re-reading the focus group transcripts. In the second stage all the ways in which objects relevant to the research topic were talked about were identified, such as drinking, gender and femininities. Stage three focused on how these objects were constituted in participants' accounts, such that key discourses could be identified and refined. Finally, stage four examined the functions of, and contradictions within the identified discourses, exploring how participants' talk was informed by discourse, how discourses were reproduced, how this was related to cultural norms and how these discourses naturalized the objects to which they referred.

## ANALYSIS

This following analysis identifies discourses that illustrate how these young women attempted to negotiate the culture of intoxication in the UK as gendered subjects. The first two discourses: *'Alcohol keeps you going'* and *'The point of no return'* elucidate their concerns with attaining an 'optimum' level of drunkenness whilst not drinking beyond a certain 'point'. The two following interlinked discourses related to the construction of femininity: *Getting the 'right' look* and *'It's really not a good look'* in which young women's talk operated to re-produce gender difference. Anxieties about the dilemmatic quality of contemporary femininity and performing drunkenness within the culture of intoxication were compounded in the last discourse: *The spectre of the drunken immoral 'chav'*. Here a class-specific image of a drunken female figure was mobilised by young middle-class women in particular to distance themselves from the possibility of being associated with *other* young women drinkers who are represented as not respectable, not feminine and not attractive.

In the following discourse a particular level of drunkenness was justified by the groups as having particular functions for a night out.

### **'Alcohol keeps you going'**

Nancy: *I find that I do tend to buy one (.) straightaway (.) as soon as I go in there (.) otherwise (.) I find that (.) I'm like (.) sober (.) and then if I sober up (.) I don't enjoy it*

Louise: *Yeah (.) that's what I find*

Nancy: *And I don't wanna be there anymore (.) because everyone else is really really drunk (.) and like (.) silly=*

Louise: *=And you just wanna get out*

Nancy: *Yeah (.) like usually (.) we'll all drink (.) before we go (.) and then (.) like it takes (.) like an hour (.) to get down there and to get in (.) and by that time you usually want another drink (.) just to keep you going [Laughs]*

[G3 MC P1]

Rose: *I think if you (.) I think it's like if you don't wanna go out and you don't drink (.) I (.) always get tired really quickly (.) it's because (.) I think that (.) alcohol keeps you going*

[G5 MC P1] <sup>(3)</sup>

In the extracts above, alcohol is constructed as a 'tool' that produces certain functions for a night out, which justifies a particular level of drunkenness. Nancy constructs being 'sober' in a club as not enjoyable, while being drunk is represented as the 'norm', through being like 'everyone else'. Rose appears to conflate not drinking and not wanting to go out. Drunkenness is justified by constituting alcohol as a tool that 'keeps you going' by enabling enjoyment, masking the impact of others' drunkenness and preventing you from feeling tired and wanting to go home.

However, as the next discourse illustrates, this 'optimal' and functional point of drunkenness was also constructed as precarious and therefore unreliable and difficult to manage.

### **'The point of no return'**

Jaz: *I think on the whole (.) I tend to (1) well (.) this is (.) this is what I think I do (.) I (.) I won't let myself go to that stage*

Evie: *[I won't ever let myself*

Jaz: *[Where I'm like (.) where I can't walk or (.) I never let myself (.) get (.) to where (.) I'm not in control (.) do you know what I mean? (.) I don't ever (.) want to feel like I'm not in control (.) of what I'm doing (.) I like (.) I like to be really drunk and stuff (.) but I know the point*

Gina: *I think it's not OK not to be able to walk or*

Jaz: *[Yeah (.) make yourself look (.) like anything could happen (.) or like (.) stuff like that (.) but I (.) I (.) I never like to go past that point of (.) no return (.) I mean it has happened*

*[Laughter]*

[G1 WC P1]

Anna: *I've got an idea of how I wanna be (.) in my head (.) but it never happens like that (.) because I do go a bit over (.) and I do get very very drunk (.) and then (.) I don't remember (.) like (.) coming (.) going home and stuff (.) and that's really scared me*

[G2 WC P1]

Young women's talk also referred to an 'optimum' level of drunkenness that did not involve losing control. Jaz constitutes 'the point of no return' as particularly undesirable and precarious, associated with being unable to walk, not being in control and importantly, making 'yourself look (.) like anything could happen' [to you]. Anna's account links young women's drinking practices to a precarious balance between risk and pleasure. Anna states that she has an idea of the level of drinking she is attempting to reach and tries to maintain some control over her drunkenness. This is similar to Jaz's account in the previous extract that 'I like to be really drunk and stuff (.) but I know the point'. In this way, the 'point of no return' constructs an 'optimum' level of drunkenness as 'acceptable'. Anna goes on to represent this 'optimum' level as a difficult state to attain in practice: 'but it never happens like that'.

### Getting the 'right' look

The following extract is from a focus group discussion with young white middle-class women about how they dress to go out at night.

Int: *So what do you wear then (.) and where do you get your clothes from?*  
Ellie: *Amy wears barely nothing*  
Amy: *Yeah [Laughs]*  
*[Loud laughter]*  
Amy: *I do*  
Int: *What do you wear then (.) say for example (.) what did you wear last Saturday when you went out?*  
Amy: *I wore some high waisted denim shorts (.) quite short shorts (.) and then um*  
Rose: *A leotard*  
Amy: *Yeah (.) you know the all the (.) lace that's in fashion?*  
Int: *Yeah*  
Amy: *I've got um (.) it's like a lace leotard and it's white*  
Int: *Yeah*  
Amy: *I normally wear short stuff*  
Cassie: *And heels (.) we never go out without heels*  
Amy: *Yeah (.) um (.) I really wouldn't be up for going to a club if I've not got high heels on*

*[General agreement]*

Amy: *That would be a way of making me not go out (.) if I've not got heels on*  
*[G5 MC P1]*

The group's discussion of the style of dress they adopt for nights out was accompanied by a great deal of laughter and self-deprecating humour. Amy's preferred style of dress is described by Ellie as wearing 'barely nothing' and this generates loud laughter across the group, as well as Amy's agreement with Ellie's statement. The young women also assert that they 'never go out without heels', a pervasive assertion across all the groups (cf. Pedersen, 2010). High-heels are represented as the basis for the production of a hyper-sexual feminine look, especially when combined with very short skimpy outfits. The notion of not wearing heels to go out is constructed as extremely undesirable and Amy represents not wearing heels 'as a way of making me not go out'. This indicates that a particular hyper-sexualised form of femininity is taken for granted as the appropriate look for a night out. However, laughing at themselves for wearing this particular 'look' also reflects how young women negotiate potential dilemmas associated with their night-time look.

The following extract is more explicit about the contradictions associated with wearing the 'look', locating this particular hyper-sexual feminine style as only appropriate for going out in the night-time economy. Here a group of white working-class young women associate being seen in public during daylight wearing the 'look' with 'doing the walk of shame'.

Int: *Is it that there's a night time feeling when you go out (.) is it like a different feeling?*  
Jaz: *Yeah it is*  
Gina: *Yeah cos I don't like going out when it's still light (1) that feels really odd (.) when you walk out and you're all (.) really dressed up for the night and*  
Jaz: *[Yeah (.) It's like (.) another pressure*  
Gina: *Yeah (.) cos when you're fully dressed up walking into town*  
Jaz: *[Yeah*  
Evie: *No (.) but it's part (.) I think (.) I don't think it's cos of this whole thing of going out at night (.) I think it's cos you've got your night time make up and your night time clothes on*  
Ria: *[And if it's still like the end of the daytime*  
Jaz: *[Your confidence will go down (.) it's stuff that you wouldn't wear in the day and you think (.) oh no*  
Ria: *[It's just like doing the walk of shame*  
*[Inaudible -all talk at once and laughter]*  
*[G1 WC P1]*

Here the young women construct being ‘fully dressed up’ as definitely not appropriate for being seen in the daylight. The talk specifically situates anxieties around being seen in this ‘look’ in daylight, which Jaz constructs as ‘*another* pressure’ and Evie refers to ‘this *whole thing* of going out at night’ [emphasis added]. Taken together, this illustrates the ways in which concerns about going out at night and performing a particular form of femininity are constituted. Ria’s account associates being seen in public view wearing the night-time ‘look’ during the daylight with ‘doing the walk of shame’. Ria is drawing on an interpretation of this particular turn of phrase to refer to walking home the morning after a night out and hence wearing the same clothes. This presents the possibility that a young woman has spent the night in an unplanned sexual encounter, which is associated with shame via discourses of ‘excessive’ (hetero)sexuality and female promiscuity, with the implication that such young women are ‘slags’ (Griffin et al., 2013). This is a highly gendered discourse: young men’s drunken sexual encounters are unlikely to be associated with shame in the same way (Willott and Lyons, 2011).

### **‘It’s really not a good look’**

Young women’s references to the importance of getting the ‘right look’ implies that there is the possibility of ‘getting it wrong’. Two interlinking discourses constitute what is viewed as ‘*not a good look*’ for young women in the night-time economy.

*Carrie: When I used to walk past Decos (.) and it used to be queues outside (.) every girl you see (.) would be underage and they all had fake tan on and high-heels (.) and (.) um (.) they had their bums literally hanging out of their clothes (.) and I think (.) oh no (.) it’s not a good look*

*[G6 WC P1]*

In the above extract from a focus group discussion with working-class young women, Carrie represents the outfits worn by a particular group of young women drinkers identified as ‘underage’ (drinkers) in overwhelmingly negative terms. This is constituted as ‘not a good look’, involving ‘their bums literally hanging out of their clothes’, short outfits worn with fake tan and high-heels, referencing a hyper-sexualised feminine style of dress. Carrie’s talk operates to distance her (and possibly her friends) from these ‘other’ young women who are constructed as getting ‘the look’ wrong. The discursive construction around ‘not a good look’ is commonplace in judgemental discourses around femininity in women’s magazines and other media within celebrity culture (Bell, 2008).

The ‘wrong’ look was associated with being unfeminine and unattractive in conventional heterosexual terms, as a gendered practice that could not apply to men. The following extract from a focus group discussion with young middle-class women illustrates the gendered character of this discourse, and the way in which negative views of public displays of drunkenness practices are constructed.

- Freyah: Lots of people say (.) that they can't go out (.) at night and not drink  
[Laughter and all talk at once]*
- Nancy: I know it sounds awful (.) it sounds awful to stereotype it (.) but I find it quite unattractive in girls*
- Louise: Oh yeah (.) when they're lying there  
[General agreement – inaudible – all talk at once]*
- Natalie: It's really not a good look*
- Louise: It's more acceptable with men*
- Nancy: Yeah (.) I think it's that (.) it almost is more acceptable for them isn't it?*
- Freyah: Yeah (.) with girls (.) they need to be able to (.) like (.) handle themselves*
- Nancy: Yeah exactly*
- Louise: And know when to stop*
- Nancy: Not that (.) that's the way it is but (1) it (.) kind of (.) is the way it is (.) it's quite disgusting (.) drinking (.) and getting drunk like that  
[General agreement]*
- [G3 MC P1]*

Here, public displays of excessive drunkenness are gendered. It is constituted as more ‘acceptable’ for men to be very drunk in public, which is not seen as ‘acceptable’ for women because this is represented as ‘really not a good look’. Nancy constructs public displays of drunkenness in young women as ‘unattractive in girls’ and ‘quite disgusting’. This exchange illustrates the ways in which women can police femininity, positioning themselves as different from (and superior to) other women who are represented as unattractive and unfeminine.

Within this discourse of gendered drunkenness, women are constituted as having to rein in excess, through ‘know[ing] when to stop’, and ‘be[ing] able to handle themselves’, in order to avoid becoming ‘unattractive’, ‘disgusting’ and therefore unfeminine. This constructs the appropriately attractive feminine look for going out drinking as involving the maintenance of a degree of restraint, which is extremely difficult if one has consumed large quantities of alcohol (Griffin et al., 2013). Nancy manages both an implicit critique of this state of affairs as well as endorsing the view of drunken women when she says: ‘not that (.) that's the way it is but (1) it (.) kind of (.) is the way it is’. These accounts reproduce the culture of intoxication as a highly gendered and a normatively masculine domain.

### **The spectre of the drunken immoral ‘chav’**

In the extract below a group of young middle-class women construct the drinking practices of other young women in derogatory ways. In doing so, they distance themselves from pervasive representations of young women drinkers and from ‘other’ young women who drink through references to the classed figure of the drunken ‘chav’.

- Davina:* And because we’ve been portrayed to be these people that just get absolutely (.) bladdered (.) and then have to be carried out of clubs
- Int:* Mm
- Davina:* That’s so harsh
- Int:* Yeah
- Davina:* And they can be really rude sometimes (.) the bouncers (.) to us
- Patsy:* It’s more the ladette thing that annoys me
- Sarah:* Yeah
- Patsy:* How many girls do you know like that? (.) I don’t know any that are like the whole (.) ladette thing (.) that’s just (.) it’s really annoying
- Int:* Yeah (.) talk to me about the ladette thing (.) because I was saying to you [To Davina] wasn’t I?
- Davina:* Yeah
- Int:* When you say ladette (.) because of my age (.) I think of (.) people like (.) Denise van Outen (.) Sarah Cox (.) um=
- Davina:* =No (.) I don’t  
[General agreement]
- Eloise:* It’s not now (.) it’s girls fighting (.) girls drinking pints (.) and just being (.) lairy (.) shouting and=
- Patsy:* =Chavs
- Davina:* Being like men
- Int:* Like men?
- Davina:* Yeah just being like men (.) not nice men  
[General agreement]
- Patsy:* Yeah drunk
- Davina:* Add in being easy=
- Patsy:* =And just going round sleeping with people
- Davina:* Yeah (.) and being like that
- Sarah:* And then guys don’t (.) guys (.) that’s what they expect from you (.) and that’s just not on
- Patsy:* [Yeah definitely]
- Davina:* And guys can just be completely horrible sometimes (.) especially cos of the association
- [G4 MC P2]

When Davina states: ‘we’ve been portrayed to be these people that just get absolutely (.) bladdered (.) and then have to be carried out of clubs’, this reflects the possibility that Davina and her friends might be mistaken for ‘other’ drunken young women in media representations – and by bouncers in local clubs and bars. Patsy goes on to reference a figure



that was a common trope in negative representations of young women during the 1990s in the UK: the 'ladette'. Once the term 'ladette' is mentioned, the talk shifts to increasingly coded references to class. When the interviewer refers to female celebrities associated with the figure of the 'ladette' during the 1990s (Denise Van Outen, Sarah Cox), the group refute this, preferring the more recent term 'chav'. The latter is a new negative figure that has become a highly derogatory coded way to refer to the white working class (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2009; Tyler, 2008).

In the extract above, young women implicitly refer to the possibility that through their engagement in contemporary drinking cultures, they might be mistaken for the drunken immoral figure of the 'chav'. Within this discourse the spectral figure of the 'drunken slag' is reproduced as a classed figure. In the culture of intoxication young women are called on to be excessive through adopting a hyper-feminine 'look' and drinking large amounts of alcohol. However, this final discourse epitomises the dilemmas and anxieties produced through being called on to adopt these positions of excess.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis presented above was based on interpretations of young women's accounts generated in the context of the research interviews. This explored the ways in which these young women constituted their experiences of drinking in the night-time economy and their participation in the culture of intoxication.

The performance of hyper-sexual femininity was constructed as a necessity, although excessive drunkenness was seen as unfeminine and viewed as damaging their ability to perform the 'right' form of femininity. Conversely, high levels of alcohol consumption were not represented as having particularly adverse effects on the performance of masculinity. Indeed, public displays of drunkenness were represented as 'more acceptable' in men. This reinforces pervasive cultural discourses in which consuming large amounts of alcohol operates as a marker of hegemonic masculinity (Clayton and Humberstone, 2006; De Visser and Smith, 2007; Gough and Edwards, 1998). The young women's accounts constructed drinking and getting drunk as a dominant masculine domain, upholding the assumption that it is *still* acceptable for men but not women to get excessively drunk in public. This supports the findings of other qualitative research concerning young men's accounts of their views on women drinkers (Clayton and Humberstone, 2006; De Visser and McDonnell, 2011; Gough

and Edwards, 1998; Mullen et al., 2007). In this way, men's participation in the culture of intoxication was taken to be unchallenged, normalised and unremarkable.

Our analysis also supports the findings of other studies on young women's relationship with contemporary femininity in UK youth drinking culture (Griffin et al., 2013; Leyshon, 2009; Lyons and Willott, 2008). Within the young women's accounts, the appropriate performance of femininity in the culture of intoxication was constituted around a 'right' look and a 'wrong' look via two interlinking discourses; *Getting the 'right' look* and *'It's really not a good look'*. The 'wrong' look was often constituted in explicit ways and centred on excessive displays of heterosexuality and excessive drunkenness. This is a significant consideration within the construction of new forms of heterosexual femininity and alcohol consumption. Postfeminism and the culture of intoxication fuse together to provide a context in which young women are called on to occupy positions of excess in relation to both drinking and hyper-sexual femininity. However, this produces an impossible dilemma for young women, and they associate these practices and positions of excess with having the 'wrong' look. To be called on to adopt such positions of excess, whilst public drunkenness and hyper-sexual femininity are still constituted in derogatory ways, serves to render young women's negotiation of contemporary femininity as fraught with anxieties and dilemmas.

Within postfeminist discourse and the culture of intoxication, young women are called on to operate as pleasure seeking subjects and engage in practices that are traditionally associated with masculinity on particular conditions; especially that they display a heterosexually attractive hyper-sexual femininity. This supports Gill's (2007) and McRobbie's (2007) theoretical arguments that engaging in hedonistic pursuits associated with young men's lifestyles, such as heavy drinking and assertive sexual behaviour, requires young women to display and craft a particular hyper-sexualised femininity. We argue that hyper-sexual femininity is a condition of participation within the culture of intoxication for young women, and that this is still located in traditional patriarchal discourse. The performance of hyper-sexual femininity produced anxieties around being seen as excessively heterosexual and promiscuous, a position from which young women were at pains to distance themselves. Nevertheless, the young women still referred to displaying a particular hyper-sexualised 'look' for participating in public drinking in mainstream venues.

The discourse of the drunken immoral 'chav' compounded the anxiety over 'getting it wrong' within the culture of intoxication. These anxieties were embodied within the spectre

of the 'drunken slag'. This spectral figure is located in traditional patriarchal discourse and produces tensions related to coping with the impossible dilemmas of contemporary femininity. Young women's attempts to disassociate themselves from the classed figure of the drunken immoral 'chav' operated as a means of avoiding being seen as unfeminine, excessive and unattractive, getting and maintaining the 'right' look in the public drinking space, and drinking to an 'optimum' level of drunkenness within the culture of intoxication.

The spectre of the 'drunken slag' is a troubling figure that emerges from the regulation of femininity and the production of the dual message of excess implicit in young women's participation in the culture of intoxication. None of the young women wanted to be associated with this reviled figure whilst they engaged in public drinking and whilst they attempted to produce themselves as highly feminine subjects. This spectral figure embodied the way working-class and middle-class women are situated within the impossible dilemmas of contemporary femininity. Postfeminist discourse constructs illusory notions of 'pleasing yourself' and 'being who you want to be' (Gentz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2007; Griffin, 2005). However, this is marred by the fear of being seen as a 'drunken slag'. Striving for the 'right' look and drinking to intoxication therefore produces the risk of being seen as – or worse – of becoming the 'drunken slag'. This is implicated with the way in which the 'right' look and the 'optimum' level of drunkenness are both unachievable states. This spectral figure is both classed and gendered. As Skeggs (2005) argues, working-class young women drinkers are constituted as noisy, ungovernable and excessively heterosexual and this figure was indeed associated with derogatory markers of working-class femininity. However, middle-class young women's accounts also reflected a fear that through their participation in the culture of intoxication perceptions of their femininities were precariously close to this figure. This spectral figure therefore encompasses the impossible dilemma for young women in the culture of intoxication and functions to re-produce classed and gendered differences. There is no male equivalent to this figure. This is also related to the construction of hegemonic masculinity and the ways in which the young women normalised men's drunkenness and constituted it as unremarkable.

## **Limitations**

Attention should be drawn to the way in which the findings are based on talk produced by a sample of able-bodied white heterosexual young women within the context of one relatively small city in the South-West of England. Therefore, not only is the talk confined to a

particular context at a particular moment in time, these accounts relate to specific groups of young women. The analysis is based on young women's talk and does not include observations of their participation in the culture of intoxication. However, it is likely that the presence of researchers observing young women's drinking and socialising might inhibit their behaviour to some extent. There are also ethical considerations to take into account within observational studies such as the challenge of obtaining informed consent. Moreover, the central interest of the analysis was in the meanings that young women associate with drinking and not primarily their drinking practices.

## **Conclusions**

Our findings demonstrate that traditional notions of gender, sexuality and femininity are still in place, and that middle-class and working-class young women are aware of the ways they are positioned as gendered subjects in the culture of intoxication. Marketing campaigns targeted towards young women by the alcohol industry encourage drinking high levels of alcohol consumption in the NTE by drawing on postfeminist discourse of empowerment autonomy and choice and notions of 'sassy' bold femininity. Young women therefore experience manifold and competing representations of 'who they can be' within the sexual double standards that still operate within the space of public drinking. The culture of intoxication is a leisure space that is fraught with impossible dilemmas and anxieties for young women. Middle-class and working-class young women are faced with the impossible dilemma of navigating the unachievable states - the 'right' form of hyper-femininity and an 'optimum' level of drunkenness.

**(7,088words)**

## **GLOSSARY**

### *Big nights out*

Nights out that are constituted as occasions with the aim to drink high quantities of alcohol in bars and clubs on the busiest nights of the week after pre-drinking at home. Big nights out usually begin after 10.00pm in bars or clubs and finish in the early hours of the morning at a club.

### *Culture of intoxication*

Measham and Brain (2005) suggest that there is a culture of intoxication in the UK where drunkenness is constructed as integral to a good night out amongst a broad social spectrum of contemporary young people. They outline 4 possible contributions: 1) alcohol consumption has been integrated into the normalisation of recreational drug

use within young people's desires to experience altered states of intoxication; 2) the recommodification of alcoholic drinks and increased strength by volume since the 1990s; 3) changes in cultural norms about the acceptable and desirable state of intoxication; 4) bars and clubs aimed specifically at large numbers of young people.

### *Mainstream drinking venues*

City-centre drinking venues specially intended for the majority of young drinkers based on popular culture and designed for 'big nights out'. These venues are designed to encourage more drinking by having limited seating and music loud enough to drown out conversation.

### *Night-time economy (NTE)*

The transformation of city-centres through the development of licensed leisure spaces, especially bars and clubs for 18-35 year old consumers. The development of the NTE is designed to produce hedonistic consumption and coincides with the deregulation of UK licensing laws.

### *Postfeminist discourse*

A way of constructing an image of contemporary femininity. This discourse situates the representation of contemporary femininity as stylishly groomed, youthful, bold, 'sassy' and 'sexually knowing'. Postfeminism incorporates the shift from objectification to subjectification and integrates a focus on self-transformation through consumption (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2008).

## **NOTES**

1. This study used two different definitions of 'binge drinking'. Firstly, 'standard binge drinking', or consuming eight units of alcohol or more for men and six units or more for women on the heaviest drinking day of the past week; and secondly, 'episodic binge drinking', or drinking at the above levels on one single day of the previous week, with all other days recorded as alcohol free. Evidence suggests that heart attack risks are greater for those in the latter category compared to those who spread their drinking across a week (Twigg and Moon, 2013).
2. Students usually avoid city centre venues on weekend nights and 'locals' (non-students) normally do not go to venues hosting student nights, which are generally cheaper (Holt and Griffin (2005).
3. The groups are numbered according to chronological order of participating in Phase 1. WC after the group number denotes working-class young women. Likewise, MC after the group number denotes middle-class young women. The young women in Group 1 WC, Group 2 WC and Group 6 WC are all working-class young women. And the young

women in Group 3 MC, Group 4 MC and Group 5 MC are all middle-class young women. P1 denotes Phase 1 discussion and P2 denotes Phase 2 discussion

4. Focus group discussions were transcribed using the following guidelines, adapted from Potter and Wetherell, (1987):

(.)	A dot in brackets indicates a pause of less than one second
(2)	A number in brackets indicates the length of pause in seconds
<u>Drinks</u>	Underlining indicates words or phrases that were emphasised
=	The equals sign indicates the utterance of the second speaker 'latched' onto the utterance of the previous speaker
...	Three dots indicate that the speech tails off
[	The bracket indicates the speakers were speaking at the same time
[ ]	Information in brackets could not be transcribed as conversation e.g. [Laughter]

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